



Testimony before the Appropriations Committee on the Governor's Budget for the State Department of Education

Dawn Crayco, February 21, 2017

Good evening Senator Osten, Senator Formica, Representative Walker, and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Dawn Crayco and I am the CT Program Director for FoodCorps, a national organization working to connect kids to healthy food in schools so they can lead healthier lives and reach their full potential. As a part of the AmeriCorps network of programs, we have twenty FoodCorps AmeriCorps service members working in fifteen Connecticut communities and in over fifty high-need Connecticut schools. I am here tonight to speak on the proposed State Department of Education budget in the Governor's budget and the need to maintain funding for critical child nutrition programs that keep our state's children well fed and engaged in learning at school.

Connecticut invests a small but critical amount of state funding to support the quality of healthy schools meals and access for children who need them most. The Governor's proposed budget combines funds for the mandatory state match for federal child nutrition programs, CT's Healthy Food Certification/Health Foods Initiative, and School Breakfast funding and consolidates into an account called "Child Nutrition Programs". I am here to express concerns for the proposed decreases in funding for the Healthy Food Certification Program or "Health Foods Initiative" and School Breakfast Program within that account.

With respect to the Healthy Food Certification, currently if schools choose to serve healthier snack or "a la carte" foods, as described by the State Department of Education, they receive an additional \$0.10 per federally reimbursable meal served. This national precedent has been a tremendous incentive for the participating 195 (92%) eligible school districts to serve healthier menu items. This represents over an 80% increase since the program was introduced in 2006. Even with new stricter federal snack stands, CT has maintained an even healthier list of snack items that participating schools must abide by.

Currently, school meal providers receive between 30 cents and \$3.16 in federal reimbursement for each lunch served. According to USDA's *School Lunch and Breakfast Costs Study II*, the national average for food cost is 37%, with the rest attributed to labor, benefits, supplies and other indirect costs. Based on this average percentage, if a district is receiving full reimbursement at the free rate of \$3.16, it is possible that only \$1.17 contributes to the cost food. We all know purchasing healthier, less processed food items can cost more money. This applies to schools as well. This extra ten cents allows many districts to supply a high quantity and variety of fresh produce, and often from local vendors and farmers. Districts' food service accounts must be financially stable. Decreasing funding support means tough decisions and less fresh produce and variety for many school districts.

FoodCorps CT service members see the direct impact of healthier lunchroom options. Their work centers around our areas of service; hands-on learning, like building school gardens and running cooking classes; healthy school meals; and encouraging a school-wide culture of health. Ensuring the healthiest school meals served in the cafeteria reinforces the learning that goes on in the classroom and the garden. With our programming and champions in schools, students can learn about the nutrients in zucchini through vocabulary lessons, have a hand in growing it in a school garden, and then see zucchini “noodles” on their tray come lunch. Our research shows that schools with this hands-on learning component with FoodCorps are eating **three times the amount** of fruits and vegetables in the cafeteria. Funding through Healthy Food Certification supports that produce being served and is necessary in completing that circle of learning.

I urge the committee to maintain the budgeted amount for Health Foods Initiative ensuring we continue to provide the support districts need to serve healthy meals and be financially stable.

The School Breakfast Program (SBP) is federally funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Connecticut offers a small, per breakfast reimbursement depending on available funds, and annual grants to schools offering SBP with 20% or more of their students participating in free or reduced-price lunch in the second prior year. This state funding allows school districts to cover their costs and encourages schools with higher need and low-income students to offer school breakfast.

Hard work on behalf of the CT State Department of Education and advocacy and nutrition groups like End Hunger CT! and the School Nutrition Association of CT combined with this state support has set CT on an upward trend in the number of schools and students serving and receiving school breakfast. According to reports from the Food Research and Action Center, CT broke through its last place ranking in the percentage of schools that offer breakfast, and now 51.4% of low-income students in CT participate in school breakfast, up from 38.9% 5 years ago. We must continue this momentum and the state support allows this to be possible.

Evidence consistently points to the fact that breakfast is a fundamental part of a healthy diet for all students, but even more so for low-income children whose nutritional status can be compromised. Additionally, there is research supporting the linkage of school breakfast participation to lower levels of absenteeism, visits to the nurse, higher levels of academic performance, and even healthier weights.

Healthy food is an essential building block for a full life. Right now we have a generation of children that are overweight, vulnerable to diet-related disease, and more likely to suffer from a variety of health problems that will hold them back throughout their lifetimes. One in three children are on track to develop diabetes in their lifetime. If we want our children to succeed in school and in life, then we must give them the foundation and tools to do so to the best of their ability. Connecticut’s Healthy Food Certification Program and School Breakfast funding are small investments in the health of current and future generations.